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9/9/2012 First Presbyterian Church of Allegan

“Only Human”

Psalm 146

Mark 7:24 -37

²⁴ Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre.^[g] He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret.²⁵ In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil^[h] spirit came and fell at his feet.²⁶ The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

²⁷ “First let the children eat all they want,” he told her, “for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”

²⁸ “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

²⁹ Then he told her, “For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.”

³⁰ She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

³¹ Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis.^[i]³² There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man.

³³ After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue.³⁴ He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, “*Ephphatha!*” (which means, “Be opened!”).³⁵ At this, the man’s ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.

³⁶ Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it.³⁷ People were overwhelmed with amazement. “He has done everything well,” they said. “He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.”

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Did you just hear what I just heard in our scripture lesson today? --Jesus just called that SyroPhoenician woman a dog! What the heck is going on here?! Would Jesus really do that?!!

Today's scripture lesson is a passage that commentators hate. You see unlike our own context when dogs are considered "Man's best friend" and we celebrate famous dogs from Lassie to Bolt, in the first century context that we are reading from today, the Jews considered dogs unclean. A Jew calling a non Jewish person a dog was **an insult**. Even though the commentators are all quick to point out that Jesus actually uses the Greek word, for "Doggies" or "Puppies" here; they often dismiss this remark as a sarcastic one or describe it as being said by Jesus jokingly, "With a twinkle in his eye". Many commentators are uncomfortable with anything that hints that Jesus was not always perfectly approachable. They imagine and describe Jesus as perfectly affable, a perfect expression of love. They believe that Jesus was a perfect human being without a whiff of sin of any kind. --And because of this perfect vision of Jesus, this little put down of this poor woman, (desperately begging at Jesus feet for help) seems to be completely out of character for the Son of God. It just makes scholars doggone uncomfortable.

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And so, in order to explain it, I think that some scholars operate out of the comfort of their own theology in order to read sarcasm or humor into the text, something that it is impossible for us to prove. – Because without us being there and hearing the tone in Jesus voice and seeing the whole situation, we cannot know if Jesus was just kidding around with this woman or not. We don't know for sure, and the scholars could be right, and it could very well be that he intended this comment to her in a funny but kind way.

But what we DO know is that the woman isn't laughing. Her little daughter is in trouble, and she is desperate need of Jesus help. As any parent knows --when your child is in a life and death situation, your focus turns to one purpose, **getting your kid the help that they need**. Parents from all over the world are alike in that they will often move mountains in order to get their kids the help that they need. They do incredible things when their kids are sick.

When little Liam Witt was about 2.5 years old, his family received some devastating news. Their little son had a stage 4 cancer called neuroblastoma. This is a rare form of children's cancer that attacks the nerve cells. When they went to the doctor to discuss treatment for little

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Liam, they were stunned and distraught to find out that 25% of the kids who are diagnosed with childhood cancers do not survive, mostly because there are not enough cancer therapy treatments out there that are especially designed for kids and their growing bodies. What is needed is a lot of funding in order to develop and test new cancer treatments for kids. Right there and then, the Witt family pledged themselves to help develop new and better cancer treatments for kids by raising the funds to do so. --At first they didn't know what they were going to do, but then little Liam's mom, Gretchen, had a very crazy idea. She envisioned a larger- than- life bake sale with a goal of baking and selling **96,000 cookies. (That's 8,000 dozen!)** So she put the idea out there and started asking people for help. The response was huge. Soon she had about 250 volunteers baking and selling cookies. Within just 3 weeks all 96,000 cookies were baked and sold and over \$400,000 was raised for kids cancer research. But even after all of the cookies were sold, orders for cookies kept coming in and other people started creating their own Cookies for Kids Cancer events in which they continued to raise funds to support this cause for more research into childhood cancer treatments. Even though the Witt's didn't intend to do it, a non profit organization, Cookies For Kids Cancer was born. Soon the organization was featured in the national media and they began to attract

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corporate sponsors which include: Glad, King Arthur Flour, and OXO brand cooking tools. From the simple beginning of one mother desperately advocating for the life of her child, a movement was born and it has grown. Even though this organization was only founded in 2008, Cookies for Kids Cancer raised over 1.3 million dollars to fund pediatric cancer therapy research in 2010.

This is very similar to what is happening in our scripture today. One persistent woman with a huge commitment to the life of her child, took a risk and went out seeking for this foreigner, this man from Galilee who it was said could help her. Once she found this Jesus, she begged him for help, and despite his initial reaction, she prevailed and a whole new aspect of Jesus ministry began. From this point on, Jesus was not just ministering to the Hebrew people; from this point on, Jesus was ministering to everyone, to the world. Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free, everyone who had faith became part of his ministry. According to Mark, it is because of the faith of this woman, that you and I, gentiles of non Jewish descent were included into this new family of faith.

Scholars are quick to point out that this point in the gospel of Mark seems to be the beginning of Jesus ministry to the Gentiles, and that little

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concession is more than just an interesting Biblical fact. It is an explanation for the question that we raised at the beginning of this passage. Why in the world would Jesus call that woman a dog?

One of the defining characteristics of being human is that we are not born knowing everything we need to know. As human beings our brains are designed to learn and to grow and to change. We are not just creatures that act on instinct, we are entities that look at the data, that change our minds and often set out to do things in a new way in a new direction. This defining characteristic of humanity is why we teach our children, why we send them to school and to Sunday school. --What we see in this passage in Mark is that Jesus mind was changed. You could say that Jesus had a “teachable moment” in which the fact that he was a fully human was evident. Jesus was challenged to look at things in a whole new way.

One of the early church controversies was the argument about Jesus being simultaneously fully human and fully divine and how that practically worked itself out and what were the theological implications of those views. From the second century until 451 AD, the early church fought and split into different denominations and divided itself and declared their opponents heretics. Even after the Trinitarian Controversy was settled with the Nicene

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Creed, the nature of Christ was still in question as to all of its particulars until they agreed on a statement on the nature of Christ at the council of Chalcedon in 451. This statement declared that Christ was one man “*to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably*”. The Christian Church did not begin with all of its theological positions all worked out. Those” humans understanding of the divine” the theological positions of the church changed over time and took on new directions with new arguments and new understandings of God. This change in what people believe is not a new thing. It is part of being human and here in this passage, I would argue it is what is occurring in Jesus himself.

You see in the Old Testament, the scriptures which Jesus would have been taught as a child, had the theology that the Jews were God’s chosen people. In this line of thinking, the children of Israel, the Hebrew people were to be changed to follow God’s law first and then the rest of the world could follow their example. What Jesus says to the Syro Phoenician woman in this passage would be a correct theological statement from that Old Testament point of view. –Jesus viewed his mission as to change the hearts and minds of the Hebrew people first. Just like the thinking that

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there is but a limited amount of money that can go toward childhood cancer therapy research, because statistically, there are more adults with cancer than kids, this was the prevailing point of view. But just like the Syro Phoenician woman believed that even a crumb of faith would be enough, and just like Gretchen Witt believed that even something as simple as a bake sale could make a difference, human minds were opened to the idea that things could be different in the future. In the same way, Jesus own ministry, Jesus own thinking was opened up in a new way to the Gentiles in a way that it had never been before

So what does all of this mean to us today? As human beings, it is part of our very nature for us to grow and to change and to learn. The things that we knew for certain when we were kids are often challenged and our perspective changes once we became an adult. New ways of thinking about things causes us to change our mind and to change our direction. This is part of what it means to be human. It changed the way that many people thought about the funding for childhood cancer therapies, it changed the way that the church thought and taught about the two natures of Jesus, and I would argue that being fully human even changed the way that Jesus thought and lived into his own ministry. May we too

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embrace our own humanity and be willing to change our thinking and change our minds and even change our theologies. May we be willing to change the way that we think about other groups of people and be willing to minister to them in a whole new and effective way when before we would avoid them as not worthy of our time. I hope and pray that we will admit that we are human and that we can and do learn and change and grow, and by doing so open up our hearts to living into a brand new way of living and serving Jesus Christ. Amen!

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